



# STRONG LIBRARIES, STRONG SOCIETIES

Bibliotecas fuertes, sociedades fuertes



**Sinikka Sipilä**



**Sinikka Sipilä** is president of IFLA, 2013-2015, and has been secretary general of the FLA (*Finnish Library Association*) since 1997. Ms. **Sipilä** completed her master's degree in social sciences at the *University of Tampere*, with specialization in library and information sciences. She was a member of the *Standing Committee of Management of Library Associations Section (MLAS)* in 2003-2011 and served as the chair of MLAS from 2007 to 2009. She was also the co-chair of the National Committee of the *IFLA World Library and Information Congress 2012* in Helsinki. She has been an advisor to *NorthSouth-South Programme* involving universities in Finland, South Africa, Namibia, Tanzania, and Senegal. She was a library expert on libraries and sustainable development in Finland, The Philippines, and Ghana. She served as a librarian and project coordinator at a library of the educational centre for South African refugees *Somafco* in Tanzania in 1991-92  
<http://somafcotrust.org.za/about-the-trust-2/timeline>  
<http://orcid.org/0000-0003-0881-9398>

*Finnish Library Association*  
Runeberginkatu 15 a 6. 00100 Helsinki, Finland  
Tel.: +358-400-659363  
[sinikka.sipila@fla.fi](mailto:sinikka.sipila@fla.fi)

## Abstract

Libraries have an impact on society by fostering equal opportunities to lifelong learning and education, research and innovation, culture and recreation for all. Strong libraries are those that have adequate capacity to meet the information needs of their user communities. Strong societies consist of informed citizens who actively participate in the life of their community and society. Crucial for strong libraries and strong societies is the democratic ideal —freedom of access to information for all.

## Keywords

Public libraries; Social services; Social inclusion; Social insertion; Marginal groups; Marginalized; Special groups; Digital divide; Refugees; Migrants; Civil rights; Literacy; Third world; *International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions*; IFLA.

## Resumen

Las bibliotecas tienen un impacto en la sociedad mediante el fomento de la igualdad de oportunidades para el aprendizaje permanente y la educación, la investigación y la innovación, la cultura y la recreación para todos. Las bibliotecas fuertes son las que tienen la capacidad adecuada para satisfacer las necesidades de información de sus usuarios. Las sociedades sólidas están integradas por ciudadanos informados que participan activamente en la vida de su comunidad y la sociedad. Crucial para las bibliotecas fuertes y las sociedades fuertes es el ideal democrático -libertad de acceso a la información para todos.

## Palabras clave

Bibliotecas públicas; Servicios sociales; Inserción social; Inclusión social; Grupos marginales; Marginados; Colectivos especiales; Brecha digital; Refugiados; Emigrantes; Derechos civiles; Alfabetización; Tercer mundo; *International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions*; IFLA.

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## Note

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<http://www.bobcatsss2015.com/wp>

## 1. Introduction

My topic today is *Strong libraries, strong societies* which is my IFLA (*International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions*) presidential theme. Each IFLA president chooses a theme that best describes her or his goals during the presidency. I chose the theme because I firmly believe libraries exert a critical impact on society by fostering equal opportunities and providing equitable access to lifelong learning and education, research and innovation, culture and recreation for all. In so doing, libraries can contribute to building stronger communities and societies. Libraries can promote and support citizens' active participation in the life of their communities and help their users to also participate in the development of activities at their libraries. This is becoming more and more important. Libraries are no longer simply delivering their services, but planning and developing them together with the people who are using them. This is the way libraries keep and earn their legitimacy. Participation is the keyword.

## 2. Background of the theme

IFLA is actively working on projects and initiatives relating to libraries and development, in particular the impact libraries have on development. This also inspired me when I planned my theme.

Another reason why I chose this theme is because it springs from our own experiences in Finland that can now be regarded as an active and strong library country. But it wasn't always that way. Finland has developed from a poor agrarian country to a modern, knowledge-based economy in a rather short period of time —over the past fifty, perhaps sixty years.

We differ from most developed western countries in the late timing, rapid speed, and intensity of our transition into our present 21<sup>st</sup> century industrial state.

The *Finnish government* has promoted an effective education system and free access to information through an extensive library network as part of the welfare state policy. According to our constitution, it is a basic right for citizens to have freedom of access to information. Finland has one of the first library acts in Europe from 1928. Libraries are seen as crucial actors in promoting this kind of access and they are included also in what is called the *Government Platform*, which is the highest political framework for action and public policy in Finland.

I believe it is also because of such enlightened government policies that today about 80% of Finns are regular library users. Books, reading, and libraries are highly valued in Finland. Both public and research libraries are open and free of charge to all. In a *National Finnish Library* customer survey conducted in 2010, over 70% of the 13,000 respondents stated that libraries had improved their quality of life. The *Ministry of Education and Culture* conducted in 2011 the first study of the benefits of libraries. It showed that 71% use libraries for fiction, 67% for non-fiction, and 58% for self-education in their leisure time. The impact of libraries on literacy has been strong and the results can be seen in the good results of Finnish students in the *PISA*

(*Programme for International Student Assessment*) organized by the *OECD*.

Education and literacy have been the pathways that have allowed individuals to rise in their societies. That was clearly expressed in the texts three Finnish library associations gathered from library users some years ago. We received over 600 essays of how libraries had changed people's lives. There were many touching stories including those from elderly people who had lived in remote areas during childhood and adolescence, yet their municipality had a library, usually a small library at the local school, and often it was the only public service available. They found the library to be a source for knowledge, recreation, comfort, socializing, and an eye-opening gateway to the world, which led to new possibilities and opportunities in their lives.

One story was from an author who has published several fiction and non-fiction books and plays. He described how he started to use the library and found there a treasure-trove of fiction and poetry that inspired him to write. The library was his university. Without it and its dedicated staff he would not have achieved what he has and is today. And, particularly heart-warming, he especially thanked a branch librarian who had been most helpful and supportive; in fact this librarian had made him believe in his talents and encouraged him to become an author.

There were also stories from younger people who had seen the library as a social place where they could meet with their friends, prepare for their exams, and do their school work together as well meeting their dates in the library. In fact, libraries seem to have a major role as a neutral, friendly environment where human relations can start and evolve. So libraries can have great impact on people's happiness! In many of the stories, the atmosphere of libraries was described as lively with the people involved in the conversations, and relaxed. The library offers a haven to lonely people and to some who need to rest. It allows people to be with themselves among other people and participate in activities and events offered by the library.

My experiences during my term of presidency have strengthened my belief in the impact of libraries on society. I have visited many countries such as Singapore, Russia, Mexico, Namibia, and Tanzania and many more and have seen the importance of access to information for economic, cultural, and social development of each country.

In Namibia there was a conference in 2013 dedicated to my theme in the African context. The presentations showed clearly how relevant and timely my theme is for many of the libraries and librarians in Africa. Many of the discussions that were held on this theme generated helpful recommendations for libraries and librarians to play a more active role in society by turning libraries into an integral part of society and playing this role more actively.

I was happy to have the chance to visit Tanzania again, where some years ago I was working in a library of an educational center for South African refugees. That early experience of the library and information environment in Africa influenced me also when I chose my presidential theme. In Tanzania I experienced the power of knowledge to people living in

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exile, far away from their home country. The library was the heart of the refugee center. It provided that community with a variety of materials from their home country, such as literature, newspapers, films, music, and cultural events to ease their homesickness and to prepare them for repatriation when that time eventually came.

In Tanzania I also had an opportunity to speak to a large group of students, at a library school in Bagamoyo, and discuss with them their views and concerns on the future of libraries. Through a *North-South-South programme* between universities in Finland and African countries, I have been informed of important issues to students and professors in the field.

I have also learned from my experiences in other projects related to libraries in Africa and Asia that libraries are a great place for delivering environmental materials for citizens. I was involved in a project to raise awareness of the potential that libraries can offer in guiding people on how they can take better care of their own environment and therefore concretely improve the quality of their own life and that of their communities and societies.

### 3. Framework for strong libraries

When I think of how libraries can become and stay strong, I believe they must operate within the context of a legal framework. By that I mean governments must recognize the rights of free access to information and freedom of expression must be established as a basic civil right, constitutionally and through legislation. Library legislation, in fact, must provide strong support for the development of comprehensive library and information services.

It is important that there are national library policies with strategic documents outlining this path. National recommendations or standards are also needed to promote consistency in service delivery.

It follows then that with such recognition and policy support from governments, libraries can legitimately request sustainable funding for the key services they provide to the community. Not just for the provision of improved physical infrastructure and collections, but also the availability of library education to train more professional staff.

If we wish to secure as many working places in libraries as possible, in spite of the economic downturn and difficulties in national and local budgets, then it is crucial to clearly communicate the importance of qualified staff to good library and information services and in that way to the concept of strong libraries. Even though we have some libraries in Finland and in some other countries open for extended hours without staff being present, that does not mean libraries no longer need trained staff. This new concept allows libraries to offer their facilities and collections to users for longer opening hours in



ICT training in libraries in Tanzania  
<http://kirjastotjakehitys.suomenkirjastoseura.fi/in-english>

the evenings and weekends when people have more time to use the library, but when there is not enough staff to work for more hours. This arrangement requires the installation of certain technical equipment including a RFID (radio-frequency identification) system for books, self-service terminals for lending and returning the loans, and security cameras. People have been very satisfied and the use of these libraries has increased. People feel the space is theirs and they feel they are trusted to use it, also without control and help by the library staff. So far no problems have been encountered in Finland in these self-service libraries.

Libraries can legitimately request sustainable funding for the key services that they provide to the community. Not just for the provision of improved physical infrastructure and collections, but also the availability of library education to train more professional staff

### 4. How to define a strong library?

So how do we define strong libraries? Perhaps their strength is defined by their mission. Professor **R. David Lankes** (2011), of *Syracuse University*, USA, has suggested the core mission of libraries, public or otherwise, is creating a nation of informed and active citizens, and the job of the library is to fulfill the needs of the community members, not simply to house materials.

From my perspective, to accomplish this goal the libraries must be seen by their user communities as welcoming safe places, with adequate space and catalogs, staffed by competent and helpful personnel, and providing access to up-

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New times, new library activities (Schulz, 2014)

to-date resources relevant to their needs, including digital content.

Of course this all can't be left to individual libraries and librarians. That burden is too great. They must be supported at the local and national levels by their library associations and at the international level by IFLA. Not just the members of these associations: all of us must act as advocates and spokespeople for all libraries. We must be heard so the decision-makers and politicians and other relevant stakeholders are made aware, not only of the benefits of libraries for society, but at the same time, of the needs of libraries if they are to fulfill their mandates, including fostering community development.

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It is here that we need to explore impact research and studies to demonstrate how libraries can have an impact on and benefit the communities and societies they serve. If we want to reassure the funders of the important role libraries play we need to base our arguments on facts and hard evidence. There is plenty of research available on this issue. It is our duty to highlight these facts so they can be of benefit to all libraries. Libraries must be more vocal in publicizing the role they can play, not only in the cultural context, but also in the economic,

educational, and social lives of the communities they serve.

Furthermore, it would be useful to emphasize to decision makers, perhaps especially to politicians, that the economic return for investing in libraries is excellent. Surveys have consistently shown that for every euro spent on libraries about four euros are returned in economic benefits to the communities they serve. It is only through such advocacy that libraries can hope to secure adequate funding even during harsh economic times.

### 5. What is a strong society like?

If that is what strong libraries look like, then what is the profile of a strong society? It stands to reason that strong societies consist of informed citizens who actively participate in the life and activities of their community. So, participation lies at

the core of my theme. Strong libraries that can meet the information, recreational, cultural, educational, and social needs of their users can promote and support participation and involvement in a democratic society. Active citizenship forms the basis for a democratic society and therefore information and knowledge are the modern tools of citizenship—universal availability through libraries is essential.

Strong societies are open, free, and equal, giving their citizens the possibility to use all their knowledge, abilities, and skills to benefit their own and their families' lives, the community they live in, and thus their entire society. And that lies at the heart of all socio-economic development.

### 6. Participation and libraries

Libraries are enablers and equalizers that make it possible for all people to live a rich life and participate to their full potential in the activities of their communities.

I link participation strongly with civil society. According to a Finnish definition made by Aaro Harju (2003), a civil society is characterized by citizens' spontaneity and activeness, participation and doing, public utility and autonomy, voluntariness and optionality, laymanship and professionalism, flexibility and independence, communality and locality, ethics and solidarity. In a civil society, citizens organize activities and services for themselves as well as for others out of their own hopes and premises.

Harju also states that the spontaneity and activeness of citizens stem first and foremost from the willingness to participate and act. People are motivated when they have an interest in some subject matter. The willingness to participate, to take part and to gather experiences, adds substance to people's lives. Spontaneous activity acts as a good counterbalance to work and brings variety to an individual's life. Through participation, the person can make new friends

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As a part of the project *Urban Mediaspace*, the city of Århus has build the new library *Dokk1*, on Århus harbour by the mouth of the river

and break the circle of loneliness. The desire to learn for oneself, but also help others, encourages many people to be active and participate in the activities of civil society.

Participation offers the opportunity and ability to exert an influence. A civil society provides numerous ways in which an individual can make a difference. The possibility to have an influence represents an important dimension of citizens' spontaneous activities within the contexts of civil society.

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Nancy Kranich (2001) from *Rutgers University*, USA, has written about libraries and a civil society. She states that as libraries serve to prepare citizens for a lifetime of civic participation, they also encourage the development of a civil society. They provide the information and the opportunities for dialogue the public needs to make decisions about common concerns. As community forums, they encourage active citizenship that renew and invigorate communities. When people are better informed, they are more likely to participate in policy discussions in which they can freely communicate their ideas and concerns. Most importantly, citizens need civic spaces where they can speak freely, share similar interests and concerns, and pursue what they believe is in their interest. Librarians can teach the public how to identify and evaluate information that is essential to making decisions that affect the way they live, work, learn, and govern themselves. Libraries also provide the real and virtual spaces for members of the community to exchange ideas —ideas fundamental to democratic participation and civil society. This is exactly what I mean by “Strong libraries, strong societies”.

The Internet environment represents a new kind of participatory culture that is also affecting the functions of libraries. Libraries are part of the communities they serve and changes in those communities will be felt sooner or later in the functioning of libraries. Libraries have been the forerunners of networking and the large use of information technology by library patrons. Libraries are one of the most active users of social media in municipalities, and market their events and exhibitions in the social media as it reaches out to

groups that usually are not reached through library communication channels or through advertisement in newspapers. The traditional task of libraries has not changed. Thanks to advanced net services, library and information services are just more effective and diverse.

Libraries are public spaces. Some libraries have linked the participatory culture of civil society to library planning to find best solutions to meet the needs of their users. I would like to give examples from Denmark, UK, and Finland of this type of civic participation in library planning.

### 6.1. Århus, Denmark

The new city library will be opened this year, 2015. I am very much looking forward to visiting it in April. For years, the users have been involved in the planning of the new kinds of services and spaces. The new library building is the result of years of experimenting with new library concepts, rather than just transporting book shelves to a shiny new landmark building. In Århus, the focus is more on the user and her or his interests and needs. Everybody's opinion is important. For instance at a workshop organized by the library children were allowed to use their imagination and give free rein to their ideas. They came back with ideas like bookshelves that can be climbed up, a bouncy castle, a ball pool, animals in a garden and fruit trees with swings on them. It became clear that children might find it boring to look at all those bookshelves in the library. Children need more space to move around.

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The comments coming from users in *World Café*<sup>2</sup> discussions, in experimental labs, or workshops have provided hints to the architects for their work to help them empathize with the world of children, the handicapped, and other user groups. The library's partners, i.e. educational institutions, clubs and organizations which use the library, were also able to give their input, wishes, and ideas for the interior design. In Århus, the library is seen also as a center for innovation. Certain events are in the pipeline, especially those related to the “maker-culture”, which means the “do-it-yourself” culture of

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our electronic age. The focus at these events will be on what can be done with technological junk, for example, how an old *iPad* can be used for other functions. According to **Knud Schulz**, the manager of the library in Århus, the libraries of the future will be concerned with people, not just media. **Schulz** has stated that they, the librarians, considered the library as a place, as a space, and as a relation. First: the library as a place within the city, as a landmark and as a catalyst of urban development. Second: the library as a space for social interaction, as an important hub of the public domain, and as an experience. Third: the library as a relation, with other cultural institutions and creative entrepreneurs. The new building was designed to facilitate these new roles for the library.

## 6.2. Idea Stores, and Birmingham Central Library, UK

There are also libraries that have had active discussions with their users while they have planned new library buildings or services. *Idea Stores* are new types of libraries that have been developed in London during the last decade; they are more than just a library or a place for learning. As well as library services, they offer a wide range of adult learning courses and an impressive program of activities and events. The library staff spent two years in discussions with different user groups before starting to plan the first *Idea Store*.

In *Birmingham*, the new main library was opened in 2013 and there too, the citizens were involved in the planning process. The building is connected to the theater next-door, and there is an amphitheater and room for exhibitions, music performances, films, and readings. This building shows the library of the 21<sup>st</sup> century can be a dynamic, attractive forum for public life. It gives people many more reasons to go to the library and this gives them more opportunities to educate themselves and to realize their own potential.

## 6.3. Helsinki Central Library, Finland

The new *Central Library* will be the main project of the year celebrating Finland's 100 years of independence in 2017. This symbolizes the strong status libraries enjoy in Finland even if the economic situation has affected libraries and

their resources. The *Central Library* is planned to be in the Helsinki city center, opposite the *Parliament*, in close proximity to the new *Music Hall*, and near a major logistic hub where the main railway station, metro station, tram, and bus lines are all nearby. It will complement the culture cluster in the area with a house of literary art where literature can be expressed in new forms. Here too, the citizens have been involved in the planning and various experiments to test ideas. Many good ideas and much feedback were gathered from the people taking part in these events. People have also been asked to give ideas in participatory budgeting workshops; in these they are asked how they would spend 100,000 euros in developing new services. Four ideas are being developed further:

- an urban workshop, or makerspace, for the new digital culture;
- a new service for children and families which includes a fairy tale birthday party;
- a borderless space for mind recreation including relaxing, silence, and serenity; and
- *Lost & found*, a new concept of fiction where classics are revived by current authors.

There are still 2,300 more ideas from the residents and partners to be considered. The vision of the *Helsinki City Library* for 2018 is "The library is a place full of new ideas. By sharing information, knowledge, and stories, we are creating a new civil society together".

A video of the new *Central Library* in Helsinki:

<http://urbanmill.org/2014/09/13/watch-the-video-welcome-inside-the-helsinki-central-library>

## 7. Conclusion

I will leave you with a quote by the American social reformer William D. Howells (1836-1905): 'The library is not a luxury, they are one of the necessities of life'. Never were truer words spoken, and I believe they have more relevance today than ever before, particularly in the context of our discussions today and tomorrow.

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Future *Helsinki Central Library*, midfloor plan and internal view

## Notes

1. *The North–South–South Higher Education Institution Network Programme* opens up new opportunities for cooperation between higher education institutions (HEI) in Finland and in the developing countries. *Centre for International Mobility (CIMO)*.  
<http://www.cimo.fi/services/publications/north-south-south>

2. The *World Café* is a structured conversational process intended to facilitate open and intimate discussion, and link ideas within a larger group to access the “collective intelligence” or collective wisdom in the room.  
[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/World\\_Café\\_\(conversational\\_process\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/World_Café_(conversational_process))

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5<sup>a</sup> Conferencia internacional sobre calidad de revistas de ciencias sociales y humanidades

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